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ABSTRACT

A distinction should be made between linguistics as a science and applied linguistics as a technology, the latter being of great potential for language classroom problem solving, the former to be saved for later, more mature study. The English teacher's main concern in language study is to impart to students the effective use of language (i.e., speaking, "auding," reading, and writing). Improving language performance in writing may be seen in terms of three processes: instruction, including demonstration; exercise; and realistic practice. The third process is crucial for maintaining, in both student and teacher, the awareness that skill in sentence construction--not an end in itself--is relevant only when its application points beyond the language lesson. Although linguistics has little direct application to literature study, the teacher can perhaps employ knowledge of language in order to develop and refine the effect of a piece of literature on his students. In general, educators should concentrate on language in relation to other aspects of human behavior and should, even in teacher education, avoid the teaching of massive linguistic theory just because it's there. (MF)

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APPLYING LINGUISTICS IN MOTHER TONGUE TEACHING

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This is the first part of an article based on a talk by W. R. O'Donnell to the B.A.A.L. Conference in Edinburgh in 1968. The second part will appear in the January issue.

The great temptation in Applied Linguistics generally is to begin from the Linguistic end, as it were, in order to ask how this or that development in Linguistics might be used. Thus, in the particular case of mother-tongue teaching—teaching, let us say, English to native speakers—we might easily find ourselves asking, for instance, what modifications are necessary before transformational-generative grammar can be introduced into the classroom. It is not difficult, as a matter of fact, to think of quite a number of recent text-books, both British and American, which have adopted precisely this attitude.[1] But it really does get things the wrong way round—like beginning with a wonderful cure for which there is no known disease.

The most obvious danger of beginning in this way is that we may end up by inventing appropriate diseases, but there are other dangers. We may, for example, mislead the teacher into seeing himself as some kind of linguist writ small; whence he very readily comes to imagine that *all* of Linguistics is somehow relevant to the English classroom; so that he forgets to ask *why* or *whether* he should teach Linguistics and only concerns himself with *how*. We must all, linguist and teacher alike, be absolutely clear on this point: however valid and acceptable a given point of view may be in the context of Linguistics, it can never be assumed that it is worthy of classroom treatment. If one grants, that is to say, the linguistic respectability of Chomsky, Halliday, Lamb, Pike, or anyone else, one does not thereby qualify him for inclusion in the English lesson. Linguistics is not just some kind of educational anteroom.

Nor are the unfortunate consequences of getting Linguistics and teaching the wrong way round likely to be confined to the classroom. Linguistics, too, and the developing discipline we call Applied Linguistics run risks of their own.

So far as Linguistics itself is concerned, the main danger is that the watered-down, and even distorted version of Linguistics that is thought suitable for school will be mistaken for the real thing. Something like this did, in fact, happen in Scotland, where it seemed to be believed in some circles that Linguistics was something that could be passed on by a kind of ritual laying-on-of-hands, performed by anyone who had even the slenderest acquaintance with the subject. As a consequence there emerged a small but active band of what are best referred to as amateur linguists. Well-intentioned though they may have been, these people nevertheless did considerable damage. With their naive and unrealistic claims on behalf of a subject they did not properly understand, they succeeded in misleading the more innocent of our teachers and antagonising the more experienced. Unfortunately, the activities of these people were popularly associated with real linguists and real Linguistics, with the result that Linguistics rapidly lost a good deal of the status it had struggled to acquire.

The danger for Applied Linguistics is that it could so easily develop into a discipline which existed merely to find outlets for Linguistics; in which case the operations of the applied linguist in relation to English teaching would come to be confined to finding ways of simplifying Linguistics for naive consumption.[2] But this would be to make of Applied Linguistics another kind of Linguistics, and this would be quite wrong. For if Linguistics can be seen as a science, Applied Linguistics has to be seen as a technology; something quite different. And the point of the distinction is simply this:

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unless Applied Linguistics is seen to exist in order to find effective anwers to real problems it will benefit nobody, least of all the applied linguist.

The proper place to begin, in other words, is not at the Linguistic end but at the opposite end, the problem end; where the first step must be to define particular problems so that it becomes possible to seek effective answers. And in the search for answers Linguistics will be only one of the things to be looked at. Depending upon the nature of the problem, that is, help may also be sought in psychology, sociology, physiology, communication theory and, indeed, in any area of knowledge that is likely to be relevant. And, always, the important thing is to solve the problem, not to find a use for this or that piece of knowledge, however beguiling its attractions.

Beginning at the problem end, so far as teaching English is concerned, means above all being specific about what is meant by "teaching English." And, unfortunately, many educationists seem quite incapable at present of doing this. They seem determined, in fact, to see "English" as some kind of undifferentiated lump wherein it is impossible to distinguish one component from another; except that everyone is sure somehow that "Eng. Lit." is part of it, and moreover the most important part. If language is given any thought at all it is afterthought. It is seen as an aspect of literature and such attention as it does receive is justified by reference to literature and literary values. Hence, for example, the popularity in recent years of Creative Writing and Speech and Drama. The sad truth is that too often the teacher of English is encouraged to regard himself as essentially a kind of literary critic, and so is prepared neither by inclination nor by training to approach language from any other point of view.

A useful way to begin defining the problems of teaching English, therefore, is by insisting that English Language and English Literature are two different things, which does not at all mean that we are not prepared to recognise the importance of English Literature as perhaps the most sophisticated use of English Language, but only that there are other uses of English Language; doubtless lacking the mystique of literature, and hence less attractive to the artistic sensibility, but essential uses nevertheless. In a sense (which sense we shall explain presently) language is not so much a subject in its own right as an essential component of every subject, and indeed of human behaviour generally. And the teaching of language is justified by all its uses, not alone that use for which the English teacher's training has hitherto almost exclusively prepared him. Clearly, one of the basic problems of the English classroom is the lack of appropriate training for the teacher. But we shall return to this point later also.

In any discussion of the teaching of English language, a further distinction is useful between teaching the *use* of language and teaching *about* language. Strangely, though this is an elementary distinction, it has seldom been made in practice. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that it is the failure to make this distinction that underlies a good deal of dissatisfaction with traditional methods of dealing with language, since these methods amounted to an attempt to improve *use* of English by teaching *about* English. It didn't work, and teachers were aware that it didn't work. Unfortunately, they did not always know why, and the attacks on school grammar which were once so fashionable among linguists sometimes led teachers to conclude that only their materials were wrong and not their methods; so that they were encouraged to ask "Which grammar should I teach?" when they might with more profit have asked "Why should I teach grammar?" It cannot be too often repeated that, regardless of the respectability of the grammar used, one is never entitled to assume that teaching *about* language will improve the *use* of language.

Clearly, one is not entitled to assume the contrary either. Some of the things taught about language *may* help in its use.[3] And so much the better if this should prove to be so, but it should not really be regarded as part of the case for teaching about language, which is sufficiently strong without such support. We are prepared, after all, to teach children about areas of their environment a good deal more remote from them than human language. It would be illogical, therefore, to deny them knowledge of something so important—to the individual, to the society, and even to the species. Moreover, human beings have a natural curiosity concerning language, and in the absence of realistic information they are prone to speculate, and almost certainly get things wrong.

All of which should not be interpreted as a plea for Linguistics in the classroom; unless

Linguistics be defined very loosely indeed. For one thing, a good deal of Linguistics proper (transformational-generative grammar, for instance) is much too abstract and sophisticated for schoolchildren: for anyone before the age of, say, seventeen or eighteen. Certainly there have been numerous attempts to simplify Linguistics for school consumption, but it seems never to have been sufficiently reflected upon that Chomsky himself took many years to explain *to mature linguists* just what he meant by "generative," and even now it is clear from what they write that some have misunderstood.[4] In any case, one of the benefits of looking at things from the classroom end is that one can see that there are a good many more interesting things to teach about language: the nature of animal "language" and how it differs from human language; non-linguistic communication in humans; language in relation to society; language in relation to the individual; and so on. What makes language interesting to humans is its connection with humans. It should first be studied, then, in this connection, and not as some cold abstraction beyond the understanding of all but a few, even of the teachers. Linguistics pure and simple—if it is ever either—should be reserved for later, more mature, study.

One reason why it is possible to ignore the question of transfer in deciding what to teach *about* language is that direct and effective teaching of the *use* of language can make reliance upon such transfer unnecessary. Indeed, effective teaching of the use of language would make it possible to hope for some transfer in the opposite direction. For, clearly, since one must use language to study language, the more effective one's use the more effective, one is entitled to hope, will be one's study. And this, of course, applies to all those other subjects studied in school which include the use of language as an essential component. One aims to teach the effective use of language, that is to say, and not mere linguistic virtuosity, and it ought never to be lost sight of that schoolchildren need to use language effectively outside, as well as inside, the English classroom.

By "the use of language" one means simply: speaking, auding (to imply an active process), reading and writing. And, unexciting as the prospect must sometimes appear to the academic linguist, every teacher of English has it as his *primary* responsibility to develop the effective exercise of these skills in his pupils. It has already been acknowledged that it is not his only responsibility, but there can be no question that it is his most important. One reason why Linguistics has become such an issue in recent years is the relative lack of success of teachers of English in meeting this responsibility, which has made many of them ready to grasp at any straw that offered itself.

Language skills have been described by S. P. Corder[5] in terms of three layers or levels: the motor-perceptive level, the structural level and the contextual level. If we use writing as a means of illustration we can say, broadly, that the motor-perceptive skills are those involved in producing and distinguishing the various symbols of written English; the structural skills are involved in the composition of acceptable (English) sentences, paragraphs, etc.; the contextual skills are those which concern the ability to operate the lower-level skills in a variety of sets of circumstances. It is, of course, the top two levels of skills which are at present ineffectively taught to so many of our pupils.

NOTES

1. The classic example is, of course, provided by the text-books produced from time to time by Paul Roberts.

2. Such a situation is by no means as unlikely as it sounds. For one thing, it would be supported by currently fashionable notions concerning "the spiral curriculum" which hold that any subject can be taught in some intellectually honest fashion to children of any age, provided it be put in the children's own terms. See Jerome S. Bruner: The Process of Education; pub. Harvard University Press, 1962.

3. For an interesting attempt to evaluate the effect of teaching transformations on the maturation of syntactical skill see John C. Mellon: Report No. 1; A Method for Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition; pub. Harvard R. & D. Centre on Educational Differences.

4. See, for example, W. A. Bennett: Aspects of Language and Language Teaching; pub. C.U.P., 1968:

> "The difference between I.C. analysis and a transformational generative grammar is that between a state and an activity. T.G.G. (also called transformational grammar for short) aims at establishing a set of descriptions of all the operations of language." (p. 39.)
>
> "The aim of T.G.G. is to establish a grammar which will produce and recognise in any one language well-formed sentences and no other sentences." (p. 41.)

5. In a lecture to the Linguistic Association of Great Britain in November, 1965.

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This is the second part of an article based on a talk by W. R. O'Donnell to the B.A.A.L. Conference in Edinburgh in 1968. The first part appeared in Vol. 3, No. 1.

The question is: can Linguistics help improve the teaching of language skills? And the answer is that it can — but only indirectly. That is to say, Linguistics may be *behind* a good deal of what is done in school to improve the use of language (though by no means all), but Linguistics should never itself *be* what is done.

The reason is quite simple. The skills of speaking, writing and so on are performance skills, and what the teacher is concerned with, hence, is improving performance, in the sense of making it more effective. Linguistics has not (yet) concerned itself directly with performance.

Admittedly, effective performance rests upon, among other things, an adequate competence[6], and there may be a temptation to short cut and try to build up competence directly by feeding in language rules in a, so to speak, raw state. But this would be confusing knowledge that can be talked about—though not necessarily used—with knowledge that can be used—though not necessarily talked about. And, in fact, competence can be got at only through performance: one can form useful intuitions about a language only if one has at least understood and spoken it.

In any case, the teacher's problem is frequently a matter not so much of building up competence as of showing his pupils how to draw effectively on a competence already acquired. Even where the competence is in some respect defective—because of immaturity or dialect interference, say, or because of some social or other disadvantage—it can still only be reached by way of performance. In neither case is there much point in a course of Linguistics.

Improving performance may be seen in terms of three processes: (a) instruction, including demonstration, (b) exercise, and (c) realistic practice. If your golf swing, let us say, were giving you trouble, you might well seek the assistance of someone who could help you improve it. He would probably begin by demonstrating a correct swing and instructing you how to stand, how to grip the club, and so on—perhaps even going so far as to place your hands correctly on the shaft. Then, once you had been shown how to swing correctly, you would take every opportunity to exercise your swing—with and without a ball. Finally, you would seek realistic practice and so attempt to develop an effective swing; in real games of golf.

Now, so far as the use of language is concerned, the schoolchild is presumably in a position analogous to this. He is in school, that is to say, to seek help from someone who can improve his skill; someone nominated by society, as it were, to perform precisely that function. And we can see how these three processes might apply in an English-teaching context if we take as an example the structural level of skills in writing.

The most basic of these skills is skill in sentence construction. The teacher begins to develop this skill in his pupils by showing them how to put acceptable sentences together. The form of words is quite important. Pupils do not need to be shown *how sentences can be taken apart*, not even *how sentences are put together*. They have to be shown *how to put sentences together for themselves*. The second thing the teacher must do is provide exercises which allow pupils to construct sentences of their own. There is a danger here, of course. Exercises so often come to be seen as ends in themselves, so that teachers begin to concentrate upon ability to do the exercises and forget the skills they are designed to teach. And, in

fact, one frequently sees develop a vicious circle in which exercises are taught that they may be examined, and examined because they are taught. This is why the third process, realistic practice, is so important. The pupil (as also some teachers) must be brought to see that skill in sentence construction is not an end in itself and that its ultimate application is not within the language lesson but beyond it; both inside and outside the school. One must teach, in other words, the contextual skills. What the teacher must do in order to ensure realistic practice, therefore, is to exploit the real writing needs of other school subjects, with their built-in motivation, rather than dissipate his energies —as so many do—in the daily pursuit of ephemeral stimuli.

Linguistics, as has already been said, comes into the business of improving performance only indirectly. It comes in at all only because it can help the teacher analyse his task (as, for example, a golf professional might analyse a swing). So far as teaching sentence construction is concerned this means that the teacher should be able to analyse sentences and make his analyses the basis for showing his pupils how they can put their sentences together. What he will finally do with his pupils may well owe as much to applied psychology, and even plain old-fashioned experience, as it does to Linguistics, but it will be none the worse for that. To repeat something said earlier: Linguistics may lie behind what is done in the classroom, but will not itself *be* what is done[6].

Linguistics will not, however, underlie *all* that is done to teach the use of English. For example, another of the structural skills involved in writing is skill in paragraph construction, and Linguistics has nothing, so far, to say about paragraphs. Linguists cannot, therefore, offer even indirect help here and the teacher must seek help elsewhere.

One important area of English teaching in school which we have not yet discussed in relation to the application of Linguistics is the area of English Literature. Lack of space will make it impossible to give it the attention it deserves, but there are one or two things that can be said quite briefly.

First, it is clear that, whatever else it may be, Literature is a use of language. Second, whatever may be the final effect of a given work, what passes from writer to reader does so by way of language, or it does not pass at all. Telepathy is not involved. It follows that the language of the piece in question might carry traces of what has been passed and it might be possible, in fact, to link particular features of the language with the final effect.

It seems not unreasonable to hope, accordingly, that the teacher who knows something about language will be able to exploit his knowledge in order to develop, and perhaps refine, the effect of a piece of literature for the benefit of his pupils. And there are, indeed, distinct possibilities here, some of which have begun to be developed[7]. But one must tread warily in this particular area, where teachers are accustomed to operate by feel and by feelings. And, in any case, if Linguistics does turn out to have an application here it will again be indirect. We must at all costs avoid the situation in which the teacher claims to be using Linguistics to teach Literature, when what he is really doing is using Literature to teach Linguistics.

If one begins looking at the application of Linguistics to teaching English from the classroom end, then, one sees small scope for any kind of direct application. In teaching about language one should concentrate upon language in relation to other aspects of human behaviour rather than upon language for its own sake, which should be reserved for mature study. In teaching the use of language one may use Linguistics (among other things) to help structure one's teaching, never as its content. In teaching Literature, teachers may find a knowledge about language useful in dealing with what is a use of language. But Linguistics can be introduced *directly* into the classroom only at the expense of time needed for effective " teaching of English."

Where there is room for something considerably more direct is in the preparation and training of teachers of English. For one thing, the teacher who knows nothing at all about Linguistics is at the mercy of the charlatan who comes along with an offer to supply, almost in the terms of a television advertisement, the new, " scientific," mystery ingredient, guaranteed to give English teaching just what it has always lacked. But the suggestion made earlier, that Linguistics may usefully influence some of what is done in the classroom, is justification of a more positive sort.

Here, too, however, it is essential to be clear about the nature of the problem if one is to avoid teaching something just because it's there. What the teacher needs most to know about is not Linguistics, but language. One selects, that is, certain aspects of language as being particularly relevant to the teacher and one aims to impart as clear an understanding of them as one can. One uses Linguistics where it will help. For example, one deals with such topics as: accent and dialect; speech and writing; writing systems; grammar and grammars; Standard English; lexicography; and so on, and one uses anything Chomsky, Pike, Hockett, Halliday, or anyone else has said concerning any given topic; provided it is relevant and illuminating.

But a good deal that Linguistics has to say about language is not relevant. For example, phonemic theory is relevant to the teacher of English, but distinctive features are not. No absolute judgement of value is intended here. It is merely that underlying the English alphabet, however imperfectly, is the concept of the phoneme, and so it possible to get from the phoneme to, let us say, the Initial Teaching alphabet in order to explain what it might be realistic to expect from such a system and just what it leaves still to do in the teaching of reading. Presumably the trainee linguist looks at all approaches to phonology but is encouraged to prefer one on grounds quite different from the teacher's.

In an article as brief as this a number of points must of necessity remain undeveloped. Thus, the meaning of "Linguistics" has been taken completely for granted, and it has, in fact, been assumed throughout that linguistics is a body of knowledge. Of course this is an oversimplification. Linguistics is essentially a way of behaving: it is something people do rather than something they know. Nevertheless, there is a body of knowledge associated with Linguistics, and indeed the whole point of behaving in the way linguists do behave is that it confers a particular status upon the knowledge they produce. Moreover, we have been concerned here with Applied Linguistics, with particular reference to teaching English as a mother-tongue, and we have concentrated upon the knowledge aspect of Linguistics in order to point out that though the applied linguist must have the linguist's knowledge available to him, he should not begin from there. He should begin instead from particular problems, to the solution of which the linguist's knowledge may be expected to contribute. This is a point of view neither too subtle nor too profound. It may even be thought rather obvious. But the effective application of Linguistics to teaching the mother-tongue awaits its wider acceptance.

NOTES

6. Those who would be interested in seeing where the principles sketched here would lead in practice are referred to: Hugh Fraser; Control and Create, Introductory Book; published Longmans, 1967.

7. For example, in Essays on Language and Style; ed. Roger Fowler. The question of the application of Linguistics to teaching literature is examined at length by Alex. Rodger in two papers: Linguistics and the Teaching of Literature and Linguistic Form and Literary Meaning, both printed in Applied Linguistics and the Teaching of English; ed. H. Fraser and W. R. O'Donnell, pub. Longmans.

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